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short subject

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Two Nordic existential comedies: *Smiles of a Summer Night* and *The Kingdom*

ABSTRACT

1. The article analyses Ingmar Bergman's
2. *Smiles of a Summer Night* and Lars
3. von Trier's *The Kingdom*. By means of
4. evolution and-neurology-based humour
5. theory it shows how the two directors –
6. who ordinarily make dark and tragic
7. films – use humour mechanisms from
8. mainstream entertainment to trans-
9. form tragic and painful situations into a
10. social ritual of mirth.

11.
12.
13. Ingmar Bergman and Lars von Trier
14. are two outstanding Nordic direc-
15.

tors best known for tragic films that evoke existential angst and melancholy. The driving force of the deep pain in their tragic films is linked to concerns about human nature, especially the inability to establish bonds to other people and the prevalence of selfish desires (see Grodal 2009, 2012 on von Trier). Both filmmakers, however, have made comedies that play through some of the same interpersonal problems but use comic frames to derive pleasure from the pain. In this article I will use Bergman's *Sommarnattens leende/Smiles of a Summer Night* (1955) and

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Trier's TV series *Riget/The Kingdom* (1994, 1997) to show how this comic reframing of existential pain takes place.

To clarify the mechanisms of such a reframing, let me first sketch some fundamental mechanisms in comic entertainment based on what I propose as a new theory of the comic, synthesizing the most important previous theories within a neurological framework (Grodal 2014). The synthesis aims to resolve a series of problems that arise if the focus is solely on one aspect of the complex reaction mechanisms (on humour see also Martin 2007).

Comic entertainment is a sophisticated development of mammalian play mechanisms. The most primitive forms consist of performing actions that might normally evoke negative emotions and lead to problematic consequences, such as fighting and pursuit, but also to exploration and growth. Due to deep-seated mental mechanisms, young animals and children may play through situations of aggression and fear without hurting each other, instead gaining pleasure from the activities.

To give an example: in *Smiles of a Summer Night* a central narrative transition that convinces the puritan young clergyman Henrik to abandon Christian chastity is signalled when the coachman Frid play-chases Petra, the maid, and she screams with playful sexual excitement while pretending to elude him. Her screaming is also a play signal, and thus the arousal caused by being chased is transformed to signals of sexual abandonment. If a situation, say a fight or flight, is signalled as playful, the participants are on the one hand aroused, activating stress hormones like adrenaline and cortisol, but at the same time quantities of pleasure-and-relaxation neurotransmitters of the opioid group, such as endorphins, are released. Comedies

are sophisticated ways of working through arousing but often quite painful events. The wide range of subgenres includes horror comedies, action comedies, romantic comedies and not least, comedies that play through scenes of shame, failure, loss and embarrassment in social interaction.

In erotic encounters, the play situation serves to dismantle the modesty-related protection of the body from intrusion by others. By using play-chasing, Bergman highlights in a joyful manner the conflict between, on the one hand, the need for body autonomy and the fear of losing control and, on the other hand, the playful pleasures of abandoning that autonomy in tender and erotic bodily fusion. This contrasts with Bergman's tragic films where the body is a seat of pain.

Central to comic situations is thus not only to produce such arousal that would normally motivate muscular actions that could alleviate the cause of arousal (escaping, killing an opponent, satisfying sex drives, crying out of sadness, evading loss of body autonomy) but also to define the situation as 'unreal' or 'playful', making any such action unnecessary. The audience can just enjoy the arousal, even if it is caused by pain or shame. In contrast to the dominant conceptions of the comic, such as incongruence theories (see Martin 2007), in which some behaviours or mental states are in their essence funny, the general theory claims that the 'fuel' of the comic is ordinary arousal and the comic result is caused by situation-specific signalling and negotiation of a play situation that makes the arousal 'unreal', backed up by innate physiological reactions, including the release of endorphins (pleasure-evoking neurotransmitters). It is important to emphasize that the comic evaluation of something as 'unreal' or 'playful' can be

seen as a bail-out mechanism from negative experiences, because often their causes are very real, and only the shared decision to laugh at them makes it possible to enjoy the painful arousal.

The signalling and negotiation of the play situation rely on basic mechanism of bonding, and thus comedy is a profoundly social institution by means of which groups may gain comfort by playful sharing of their negative experiences (but also by exclusion so that the group laughs at other persons and groups). A difficult question, however, remains how to signal and negotiate that a given event should be experienced as playful, pleasurable and 'unreal'. Animals and children may emit play signals such as specific sounds or laughter to convey that 'this fight is for fun', and audiences of comic entertainment likewise express themselves by laughing, thus also signalling to other members of the audience that the event is experienced as comic, playful and shared by the group.

Film characters, however, cannot usually signal the playfulness of the comedy by laughing all the time. Instead they need to signal arousal, for instance surprise, pain or shame. A person who laughingly slips on a banana peel is not as funny as the person who shows surprise, shame or pain by falling. Comic entertainment therefore develops other ways to signal playfulness, which I will exemplify in relation to works of Bergman and Trier. Some of these signals are conventions – even highly original film-makers such as Bergman and Trier need conventional play signals in order to transform pain, shame and other negative causes of arousal to comic pleasure. The use of conventions is therefore necessary to establish the play contract. Although high art critics and even the film-makers themselves may regard such a mix of conventions and originality as less

elevated than pure avant-garde art, comedy activates the very roots of art: to create a social ritual to regulate the emotional impact of central human experiences.

COMIC CONVENTIONS MEET MORAL ANXIETY

Smiles of a Summer Night was forced on Bergman in the sense that he was under economic pressure to make a film that could succeed at the box office. Perhaps in part for that reason, he borrows proven formulas from several centuries of French theatrical tradition, including the comedies of Pierre de Marivaux and Pierre Beaumarchais and plays from the so-called belle époque, for instance those of Georges Feydeau; French film comedies such as Max Ophüls' *La Ronde/The Round* (1950) also served as models. Central in such comedies is the use of promiscuous sex and moral transgressions such as infidelity to create arousal. Bergman even follows a centuries-old French tradition by portraying the servant class and the aristocracy as more promiscuous than the middle classes: the maid Petra signals her willingness to the men around her, and Count Malcolm is on principle a Don Juan with no intention of being faithful to his wife. Part of the arousal is thus caused by portraying relatively uncontrolled sexual behaviours and by a series of embarrassing confrontations caused by the philandering.

However, the arousal is partly transformed, becoming humorous and unrealistic, by the use of character stereotypes and conventional plot devices. These stereotypes are clear play signals telling the audience of the mid-1950s that the callousness is part of a social ritual that may be enjoyed without the customary moral restrictions on enjoying promiscuity. The historical setting reinforces this play signal. The film further

incorporates a series of classic slapstick devices. An example: one of the main characters, Fredrik Egerman, is humiliated by falling into a puddle so his clothes become wet, causing him to borrow a comical night outfit, including a ridiculous cap. In this attire he is caught unawares by its rightful owner, the jealous Count Malcolm. Much later, a duel between the two competitors for the favour of actress Desirée Armfeldt takes the form of Russian roulette – except that the gun is loaded with soot. Fredrik does not die, but is once again humiliated in a comical manner when soot covers his face.

Although stereotyping and slapstick send a steady stream of play signals, beneath the surface lurks pain caused by fear of separation from loved ones and conflict between family members, the type of conflict that is central to other Bergman films. This might be described as the tradition of the tragic Nordic *fin de siècle* as expressed in the dramas of Ibsen and Strindberg. Bergman's *oeuvre* mostly focuses on a sense of abandonment and the failure to bond, whether in a cosmic-existential context as portrayed in *Det sjunde inseglet/The Seventh Seal* (Bergman, 1957) or in interpersonal relationships, as in, among others, *Smultronstället/Wild Strawberries* (Bergman, 1957), *Såsom i en spegell/Through a Glass Darkly* (Bergman, 1961) and *Persona* (Bergman, 1966).

In *Smiles of a Summer Night* a prominent reason for separation panic is jealousy, the feeling of being betrayed experienced by several of the characters. Moral conflict is another cause of arousal, as seen in the young clergyman Henrik, who feels torn between his ideal of Christian virtue and his sexual urges. (These urges have a slightly Oedipal twist by being partly directed at his father's young wife Anne.) The moral conflict does not, however, lead to a tragic outcome. Instead, when Henrik tries to commit

suicide he accidentally activates a button that brings Anne, asleep in her bed, into his room. Shortly thereafter the two elope. Love conquers conventional morality. The romantic elopement, calling to mind that traditional comedy generally concludes with a marriage, is in turn juxtaposed with the sexual encounter between Petra and Frid, a joyful frolic unlikely to lead to permanent commitment.

In addition to the classic ritualized play signals of comedy, *Smiles of a Summer Night* incorporates lyrical-mythic play signals centred around the mystique of the summer night that has provided the film with its title. The coachman Frid claims that the midsummer night has three smiles, the first for those who open their hearts and their bodies, the second for the fools, and the third for those in emotional pain. These three smiles serve as background to the erotic encounter between Petra and Frid, and seem to point to a pantheistic, 'heathen' romantic fatalism where Mother Nature laughingly embraces all human beings and 'comically' diminishes their pain. This romantic fatalism is supported by the images of nature that supplement the theatrical flavour of indoor scenes; the bucolic outdoor scenes seem to draw on Swedish folklore and indicate an alternative to Nordic Protestantism. Lyrical sex in a nature setting had been present in Arne Mattsson's Golden Bear-winning *Hon dansade en sommar/One Summer of Happiness* (1951) and Bergman's *Sommaren med Monika/Summer with Monica* (1953), just as one of the first Nordic examples of female nudity (in nature) was Bjarne Henning Jensen's *Ditte Menneskebarn* from 1946. Such films established the mid-century international perception of the Scandinavian countries as having a 'natural', emancipated relation to sex. For Bergman, the comic form allowed him to express moral double standards, to

embrace both carnal delight and romantic love.

MEDIA COMEDY MEETS EXISTENTIAL ANXIETY

Some of Trier's basic tragic problems are similar to those of Bergman: the frailty of human bonding, especially the absence of motherly love, and unfaithfulness; additionally Trier's take on the problems of care and bonding may – as in *The Kingdom* – focus on abuse. During his work on *The Kingdom* he also made *Breaking the Waves* (1996), which highlights the sexual abuse a crippled husband demands that his wife undergo to feed his sexual imagination. Trier's previous work for television, *Medea* (1988), concerns a woman who kills her own sons by hanging and poisons her husband's new wife. The themes of problematic care and bonding are intimately linked to anxiety about the frailty of the human body as a physical object and the conflict between modesty and lust (cf. Grodal forthcoming). However, *The Kingdom* is unusual in Trier's oeuvre for linking the problem of care in close personal relations to that of 'social care' as exemplified in the hospital (and linked, in turn, to his personal ambivalence about bonding-related emotions, caused by his psychological anxieties (Björkman 2003)).

Trier plays with the possibility of escaping from what he sees as scientific materialism violating the sanctity of the body. He comes to a world of spiritualism, but since Trier is a little shy of committing himself to this perspective, he frames it as partly comic. Furthermore, as often in the case of supernaturalism, when the agents of good acquire magic powers so do the agents of evil. Therefore the world becomes chaotic due to a lack of stable causal forces.

The centre of the abusive materialism is the hospital, a perfect setting

for portraying the frailty of body and mind, here made more terrifying by transforming the doctors from healers to abusers of patients (or of themselves, as in the case of a doctor transplanting a diseased organ into his own body). In contrast to Trier's previous films, where abuse takes place in the past, *The Kingdom* converts a central symbol of care of body and mind into a symbol of abuse taking place in the heart of contemporary Denmark.

An arousal that feeds on fear, disgust and shame needs strong play signals to be transformed into comic pleasure for a mainstream audience. Trier's take on comedy has a quite different background than the classical theatrical devices in *Smiles of a Summer Night*, partly because the nearly 40 years between that film and *The Kingdom* have replaced theatre with a world of media. Trier uses the genres of mainstream film and television to produce arousal and to provide stereotypes and exaggerations that may be used to signal comic playfulness. The generic roots of *The Kingdom* are horror fiction, especially David Lynch's *Twin Peaks* (1990–1991) and Claude Barmas' *Belphegor* (1965) (see Schepeleern 2000), and hospital soaps and sitcoms with some touches of crime fiction. In the introduction he additionally borrows lyrical elements from the art film (Tarkovsky). The TV series is thus able to draw on a wide range of emotions to create arousal, for instance horror, fear, curiosity, sexual desire, and very often disgust provoked by violation of body integrity. The play signalling is often achieved by creating a conflict between different generic features or by presenting them in an exaggerated fashion, for instance by letting hyperbolic horror elements exist side by side with sitcom elements.

Also central for arousal in *The Kingdom* are emotions cued by interpersonal relations where people

humiliate each other, cheat, or behave in a ridiculous or embarrassing fashion, as is typical in sitcoms. These emotional situations often serve as comic play signals (even if some viewers might feel too embarrassed to laugh). In some cases Bakhtinian carnivalesque elements of humour are used, where the fun consists of a reversal of the social hierarchy. The series has no real heroes, but the hospital's lower social layer is portrayed as less ridiculous than the upper layer, with the leading doctors behaving in an especially preposterous manner. A main reason for this is that the series mounts an ambivalent attack on enlightenment and science and instead advocates a romantic stance on spiritualism that, according to the series, has been suppressed by materialism and science.

Typical of the underlying pain of lack of bonding is the relation between Mrs Drusse and her son Buller. Drusse, who has high aspirations of communicating with spiritual, supernatural forces, is in some respects the central character. She functions as a 'detective' who reveals the abuse a father (one of the doctors) has perpetrated on his illegitimate child, Mary, many years ago. Drusse herself, however, is also extremely selfish and abusive in relation to her son. The bonds are even more problematic in the supernatural world. The innocent human, Judith, becomes pregnant by the evil dead doctor – the man who abused his daughter – and gives birth to a monster, a reversal of the story of the Virgin Mary becoming pregnant by the Holy Ghost and giving birth to a Saviour. Thus, in *The Kingdom* the very biological core of bonding, the mother-child-relation, is strongly contaminated, but contrary to the tragic tone related to failed bonding in the rest of the *oeuvre*, *The Kingdom* enjoys the grotesque and monstrous qualities of this failure.

Compared with *Smiles of a Summer Night*, *The Kingdom* is dark and grim. In Bergman, the comic form is used to soften the existential angst and the moral problems created by carnal desire. Bergman's comedy ends on a cautiously optimistic note: the young lovers are united and the middle-aged couple, Fredrik and Desiree reunite to share the parenting of their child. In contrast, in Trier's serial the comic sugar-coating is used to let people enjoy an extremely dark vision of the world ruled by immoral forces, where bodies are sick, violated or contaminated and minds are totally self-involved. Furthermore, social institutions are portrayed as deeply corrupt and incompetent.

CONCLUSION

In the grand picture of cultural history, Bergman unites an eighteenth-century spirit of licentiousness with small touches of nineteenth-century Protestant pain. In contrast, Trier's tack is to merge dark romanticism à la Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein* from 1818 with twentieth-century social angst as portrayed in zombie films, but also in the social embarrassment and shame that feed sitcoms where arousal is sugar-coated with comic unrealness. The comedy serial is also, of course, a love and hate tribute to the mainstream film and TV genres that Trier parodies.

Bergman created *Smiles of a Summer Night* in part by using play signals borrowed from the world of French theatre, whereas Trier shaped *The Kingdom* with play signals from a world of American film and TV as well as elements from art film and Danish folk comedy. In accordance with my general theory of comic entertainment, the main sources of pleasure are arousal due to negative emotions (even if some of the

1. pleasures of *Smiles of a Summer*
 2. *Night* derives from sexual licentious-
 3. ness) that are transformed to pleas-
 4. ure via play signals and shared play
 5. conventions among the spectators.
 6. Such conventions are not held in
 7. high regard in the art film commu-
 8. nity; pain and melancholy in tragic
 9. films confer more prestige than
 10. comic joy, even among film-makers.
 11. Thus Trier regarded *The Kingdom* as a
 12. 'left hand work', that is, not central
 13. to his *oeuvre*. However, a main func-
 14. tion of comedy may be consid-
 15. ered a kind of mental therapy that
 16. allows people to deal with negative
 17. emotions that become more acces-
 18. sible in a frame of comic unreality.
 19. For Bergman personally, making
 20. *Smiles of a Summer Night* was thera-
 21. peutic in one of the darkest periods
 22. of his life (see Björkman et al. 1993)
 23. and resulted in his international
 24. breakthrough: the film won a prize
 25. in Cannes. Similarly, in *The Kingdom*
 26. Trier deals with some of his most
 27. personal anxieties linked to family
 28. and illness (see Björkman 2003), but
 29. in a form that made the series his
 30. breakthrough into public recognition.
 31. By incorporating the conventions of
 32. various popular genres in the form
 33. and content of their comedies, the
 34. directors may even be performing
 35. a kind of personal therapy, letting
 36. fears and desires surface within the
 37. framework of comic playfulness
 38. and unreality. From a neurologi-
 39. cal point of view, comic and tragic
 40. reactions are closely related: crying
 41. and laughing share most of their
 42. neurological support. Both reactions
 43. are based on self-modification in
 44. response to emotional overload and
 45. both reactions invite other people
 46. to share them. There is therefore
 47. some logic in the fact that these
 48. two Nordic film-makers of tragedies
 49. tried the other solution to negative
 50. emotional overload: to laugh, and
 51. invite their audiences to participate
 52. in a shared therapy.

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